

OPINION

Op-Ed: Saluting a stand against Holocaust denial

By [Warren L. Miller](#) · July 12, 2010

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- An official Iranian delegation from the city of Shiraz recently visited Weimar, its sister city in Germany. Like Weimar, Shiraz has been a capital of high culture for centuries, and appreciating the arts undoubtedly was high on the itinerary of Mayor Mehran E'temadi and his fellow delegates.

The delegation from Shiraz did not, however, see fit to tour the other, less proud side of Weimar's history -- the concentration camp of Buchenwald, located just four miles from the city, where more than 50,000 Jews and others were killed and made to endure cruel and barbaric treatment. The Iranians were scheduled to visit the concentration camp memorial, but they refused to go, for reasons that are obvious to anyone who has heard the anti-Semitic rants and Holocaust calumnies spewed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

That the Shiraz delegation on their June visit chose to avoid the discomfort and embarrassment of confronting the truth is not surprising. But what might come as a pleasant surprise is the heartening reaction of their German hosts: The Weimar City Council refused to meet their guests from Shiraz.

The message Weimar sent to E'temadi and his delegation could not have been clearer: If they choose historical revisionism over historic truth and prejudice over tolerance, then they are not welcome in respectable company, no matter what other values or interests they might share.

It is important to recall that Weimar is not just any city with a black stain on its past. Weimar is a 1,000-year-old town renowned for its cultural heritage. It is the city of Goethe and Schiller and Bach and Liszt. The Bauhaus art movement was founded there. And yet the city's illustrious past does not prevent its current

leaders from facing up to a shameful era in its history, a lesson clearly lost on the delegation from Iran's city of poets.

Had E'temadi and his fellow delegates not avoided Buchenwald, they would have been hard-pressed to let stand their president's Holocaust denial. As cultured, intelligent people, they could not have misunderstood the purpose of the ovens in the concentration camp's crematorium. Walking through Buchenwald's "Little Camp," where the Jews were confined and the worst conditions existed, they hardly could have sustained the lies of their leader. Coming face to face with the meat hooks on which the Nazis hung prisoners before clubbing them to death, the distinguished guests from Shiraz would have received a sobering insight into what is reality and what is myth.

Indeed, the Iranian delegation would have been shamed into silence had they read the words engraved on the memorial at the Little Camp -- words that I wrote when creating the memorial on behalf of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad:

"Conditions were barbaric. Windowless stables with dirt floors intended to house 50 horses at times contained nearly 2,000 people. There was no running water, no sanitation and virtually no heat in the stables. ... With only one latrine, many inmates were forced to use their food bowls as night latrines. By 1945, an ever-present stench of human excrement pervaded the site. Corpses lay about in the open as the death toll increased daily. The Little Camp was a place of deepest despair for those left there to be forgotten and to die from cold, starvation, dehydration, debilitating labor, torture and rampant epidemics of diseases that went untreated."

Even at the cost of disrespecting their German hosts, however, the Iranian delegation elected not to go to Buchenwald, a site visited by 750,000 people each year.

One can only hope that the delegation's decision was driven by fear of political repercussions back home. The alternative explanation for their actions is far more worrisome: That Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial is finding a receptive audience among the Iranian people. Repeated often enough, vicious lies eventually will be accepted as fact by many.

The people and leaders of Weimar are to be commended for not looking the other way as E'temadi and his fellow Iranians denied the city's past. Most Germans know all too well the cost of being bystanders when prejudice and hate are not confronted. They understand that when the Holocaust is denied and truth is under assault, so too is freedom, and so too is humanity.



(Warren L. Miller is chairman of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, a federal government agency that works with foreign governments to preserve endangered sites of cultural and historical significance.)